

Jin Xing: from Chinese army officer to dancing TV stardom

China's most fascinating celebrity is probably the only contemporary dancer also capable of blowing up a bridge – she also used to be a man

by TANIA BRANIGAN • SEPT. 10, 2012



Jin Xing: 'Everything I do I choose – no matter how tough or whatever failure.'

Photograph: Dirk Bleicker

Interviewing Jin Xing is tiring enough: her emphatic but accelerated delivery fills pages of a notebook within minutes. Being her must be truly exhausting. Her starring role in a Shanghai play has come to a close, but there's a new contemporary dance production; a television talkshow to host; guest spots as a judge on a TV talent contest; and three young children to mother.

That's just this autumn. She has crammed much more into her life, partly thanks to the fearsome military discipline forged as a colonel in the People's Liberation Army performance troupe. She may be the only acclaimed contemporary dancer capable of blowing up a bridge. Though she is just 43, Jin's life has spanned numerous roles, two continents and, most famously, both genders.

"All over the world, it's very tough for people to accept it," she says of her gender reassignment

surgery.

But in [China](#), which remains in some ways highly conservative, her frankness is almost unique: "Homosexuals are like a small island. [Transgender](#) [people] are a tiny island."

This is not a complaint. For one thing, Jin does not believe in them. "I hate whining. If you want to do it, do it. If you're doing it and complaining – what a pathetic life."

For another, she believes that having had the surgery makes her "more privileged, special and stronger, because I have a wider angle in looking at society and life".

Her career has earned her plaudits from Li Yinhe, a sociologist and one of the best-known advocates for LGBT rights in China, who says, "She is still discriminated against by society, but she is very brave in facing it. She has a good family and successful career; her achievements have made her an icon."

"I chose the stage, then dance chose me," Jin says while whacking on makeup in her dressing room. As a young boy, Jin joined the entertainment troupe of the army. All the performers had to undertake the PLA's routine training and young Jin struggled with grenades and machine guns, too big and unwieldy for his slight hands and body. The dance classes were equally harsh, with instructors physically contorting the children's bodies until they were flexible enough. "In western culture, you'd call it complete child abuse. In China, that's the culture: you want to be the best? You do it."

Were they beaten? "If you made a mistake? Of course!"

With only one visit home each year, homesickness added to the pressure. "I'm still benefiting from the discipline of military training. I have a performance tonight but at 9am tomorrow I'll be back in the [dance] studio training again. Even the way I take my dance company – that's about discipline. Nobody breaks my rules," she adds. "*Big trouble.*" After saying this she flashes a lovely smile.

She studied contemporary dance in New York. But the lessons outside the studio proved as important as those inside: "If you ask what I am proud of – I am only proud that once I was 19, when the government sent me to the US, I took charge of my own life. Everything I do I choose – no matter how tough or whatever failure."

It took her years to make the hardest choice. Even as a small boy, Jin knew that "something was wrong. I so envied my sister. I felt I should be her."

Unable to make sense of the feelings, he sublimated them for years. For a while after moving to New York, he thought he might be gay. Finally, that childhood sense reemerged, "a weird feeling in myself – that I should be a woman".

To Jin's surprise, her conservative parents accepted her decision without question; her father had always felt there was something different about his child.

But her life story has the mythic outlines of a movie ("Pedro Almodóvar is a good friend of mine. One day he will make a movie out of my life.") There was, of course, a twist.

She woke from her operation to discover that the nerves of one leg had been badly affected. Doctors warned she would walk with a limp.

"Oh. My. God. The first moment I realised my leg was damaged, I wanted to jump out of the building. I thought my life was finished," she says. "But after three, four days, I thought well – this is another test." She was on stage within three months.

Next came the adoption of three children. A few years later, she sat next to a German businessman on a flight from Shanghai to Paris. Heinz-Gerd Oidtmann rang her the next day; though he took a few days to digest the news that Jin had been a man, they soon became a couple. Oidtmann calls her a "control freak", she jokes; and she has struggled to adapt to his European mindset: "I've tried to learn to take a holiday. After three days I feel guilty."

As for the children, who are usually kept away from iPads, "rubbish" TV and junk food, "They get very close to Daddy. When Mummy's travelling, he takes them to KFC ..." She does not look too worried at the prospect. For all her talk of discipline, her eldest son, now aged 12, will soon head to boarding school in the UK because "the Chinese education system sucks ... The first thing kids learn is: obey."

Few would wish to cross Jin. She called a fellow talkshow guest – a celebrity who criticised his wife for telling people he had hit her repeatedly – a "filthy and selfish man".

She's a judge on the Chinese equivalent of Strictly Come Dancing, but is scathing: "In the UK they

really work at it. Over here it's second- or third-class movie stars who just want the exposure and work for a maximum of one week. It's really low-quality dancing." Now she has her own debate show, which airs on a Hong Kong station rather than the heavily censored mainland channels. But she picks her topics carefully: "I'm not against the party [and] I know the laws – but I can talk about social issues." Officials trust her because "they know I know the borderlines", she says. Besides, what better way to demonstrate the changing face of China than via an outspoken transsexual former colonel?

Additional research by Cecily Huang

Original URL:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/10/jin-xing-chinese-army-dancing-tv>